

By the Kansas Historical Society

## The Progressive Movement's Impact on Public Health Reform

The turn of the 20th century was a time of unrest and reform in the United States. The new Progressive Movement continued making changes the Populists had begun. These changes were said to be "progress." People began to think differently about the role of government in citizens' lives. State laws passed between 1904 and 1912 reflect the changes made by Kansas Progressives. In the process, Kansas led the way to national change.

### What was the problem?

Houseflies were everywhere because there were no window screens to keep them out. Rats and flies were widespread in food processing factories too. There were no drinking fountains, so everyone used a common "tin dipper" to get a drink of water from a public water bucket. People did not know that these things spread disease.

"SPARE THE LITTLE CHILDREN!"



## What was the solution?

The goals of the Progressive Movement focused on public health reform:

- Ensure food was safe by setting pure food standards and giving the Kansas Department of Health enough resources to inspect places where food was processed.
- Educate doctors about how germs cause the spread of disease and what they can do to stop it.
- Help the public to understand how common pests such as flies and rats can spread disease.
- Outlaw the use of a common drinking cup and provide spittoons in public places to keep from spreading disease.

The Progressive Movement led to laws that protected Kansans from the spread of disease. New scientific discoveries showed that germs, something too small to see, caused disease. Flies, rats, and unhealthy habits spread germs and this caused people to get sick. Germs became the enemy and laws became the weapon to fight this enemy.

One Kansas law helped protect Kansans from the spread of disease. Kansans had become aware that unclean conditions spread disease and spitting in public created unsanitary conditions. The disease most often spread by spitting was tuberculosis. This law made it illegal to spit on sidewalks or other public places. Spittoons now had to be provided in buildings and railroad cars.

## How did Kansas lead the way to national change?

Kansas led the way to national change when legislators in 1907 passed a law to prohibit the "tin dipper" or common drinking cup in public places. Everyone used this public drinking cup because it was convenient. Sometimes these cups were used for years and years. Few states prohibited the use of these public cups. It was not until 1912 that a federal law prohibited use of a common drinking cup on railroads.

